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ABSTRACT

Dissemination of educational research findings, according to this paper, should provide support, information, and assistance to practitioners working in the schools so that teachers may be better equipped to do their jobs. One purpose of this paper is to explore some probable causes for the lack of impact of current educational dissemination activities on their targeted audiences. Another purpose is to propose recommendations for a simplified model of disseminating usable findings from educational research and development to local schools and districts. The paper recommends that educational researchers collaborate with school practitioners for setting research agendas and also fully participate in all steps of the research and development process. Also, federal, state, and local support should be given so dissemination activities can influence schools toward positive change. (Author/LD)

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Toward a Simplified Model of Educational Dissemination

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Dissemination of findings of educational research is a topic that has been considered and much talked about in educational research circles since the inception of the profession. Equally considered in those early days was the question, what is educational dissemination, or how is it defined? The question is still prevalent and seemingly no closer to being answered. As recently as 1979 the debate to define dissemination persisted. Disagreements in the meaning were obvious. For example, the "Report of Dissemination Processes Seminar II" (p. 19) provided four of the most common definitions. In an effort to obtain one usable definition, Virginia Thompson (1980) and others of the dissemination program synthesized the four definitions into one: The Utilization of Resources, Through a Variety of Mechanisms for the Goals of Improvement of Practice and Increased Educational Equity. The key phrase in the Thompson definition is "a Variety of Mechanisms." The phrase accounts for the four words used in the other definitions to describe how the resources are utilized: spread (one-way information sending), exchange (two-way information sharing), choice (selection from various possibilities), and implementation (adaptation or use of new innovations).

Thompson's definition may also be criticized and argued against. However, a better approach to defining educational dissemination might be through consideration of two questions: what is the ultimate purpose of educational dissemination and given that purpose, how is dissemination best carried out?

The answer to the first question seems somewhat connected to Thompson's definition. I would say that the ultimate purpose of educational dissemination is getting the findings from educational research into any form that can influence, change, impact, or help educational institutions to more effectively carry out their mission. Put in another manner, disseminating of educational research findings should provide support, information, assistance (improvement of practice) and the like for individuals (practitioners) working in schools so that those individuals may be better equipped to do their job. That job is educating the nation's youth. Through effectively carrying out the mission of educational institutions, equity or equal educational opportunities will be achieved.

The second question, how is dissemination best carried out, is more difficult to answer because it depends directly on the way one chooses to define dissemination. For example, if one defines dissemination as merely "to spread" the word, then pamphlets, brochures, and public relations kind of activities, like formal speeches, would be the primary methods for getting information or knowledge into the hands of practitioners. On the other hand, if one subscribes to Thompson and company's definition "spreading the word" would be one method out of four and not necessarily the most appropriate.

I prefer the Thompson definition over others but would change it to read something like, transforming the findings of educational research into usable form through a systematic process for the goals of improvement of educational practices and increased educational equity in public schools. My purpose however in writing this paper is not to challenge

other definitions of dissemination. I am sure that arguments about the most accurate and suitable definition will continue to flourish, but the need to have a definition is especially important for addressing the second question. It is the consideration of that question which is the true focus of this paper.

The myriad of definitions for dissemination have resulted in a myriad of activities called dissemination. Despite a continuous debate about dissemination definitions, dissemination in some form has been an ongoing part of educational R & D. Few social scientists as well as school practitioners will state that dissemination activities to date have been successful -- success as measured by the answer to the first question that I posed. The impact of dissemination in helping seems to have been minimal at best. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to explore some probable causes for current educational dissemination activities not impacting on their targeted audiences and (2) to propose recommendations for a simplistic model of disseminating usable findings from educational R & D to local schools and districts. In addressing the two issues, I rely upon the simplistic definition I provided above, draw upon selected papers and seminar reports of NWREL's dissemination program as well as literature on dissemination from other professions, and utilize my direct experience as one who both produces knowledge to impact upon educational systems and tries to hookup or link that knowledge with school practitioners.

Inadequacies of Educational Dissemination Activities

Closing the gap between educational research and practice -- that is findings from educational research having a direct and almost

immediate impact on educational practices -- has been a loosing battle. Dissemination was to have been the new super weapon of educators and was to have brought about a swift and sure victory; the gap was to close. But unlike the discovers of a new miracle drug in the medical lab, who can say to practicing physicians in the field, "Just give your patients 5 cc's of this drug a day for three days and the bacteria causing the disease will die off," social scientists in the educational labs who hunt for miraculous weapons or drugs to destroy the diseases that plague educational organizations are unable to make the definitive statements of their medical counterparts. In fact, even those discoveries made by social scientists that do seem to be borderline miracles, are not easily transportable from the lab to the body of the school organization. They are not easily transportable because of the complicated and intricate mechanisms that exist for getting findings to local schools or districts. And they are not easily transportable because educational practitioners have too often heard the cry of "eureka" from researchers and are reluctant to readily embrace new quick cures for seemingly long lasting and lingering diseases. Other problems that have kept dissemination activities from adequately bridging the gap between research and practice are the reluctance of troubled schools to participate in research projects or dissemination activities; lack of user initiated research; the inbred hindering elements of the change process, and the values and goals of the research profession. I am sure that numerous other problems of some significance have been excluded from the aforementioned group. The intent of the current paper is not to be exhaustive in finding problematic areas of dissemination, but to explore some of the more salient barriers that

hinder the dissemination processes and thereby render the process inadequate. Each of the salient barriers will be considered in more detail below. The discussion of the barriers concludes with a closer look at some practices that lead to complicated and intricate methods of dissemination.

School Political Environment

Research on the problems of public schools was presumably initiated in order to provide information, fact, hypotheses, and percepts about ways to practically solve, eliminate or reduce the school problems. Problem solving, of course, is an ongoing process. A goal of local educators is to have the crucial elements of problem solving, including use of research findings as an integral part of the school. In some schools that goal has been accomplished, but the critics of educational research are quick to point out that its limited successes have occurred in the schools that need aid from research findings the least. These schools are defined by critics as having had minimal trouble and from their start have been relatively trouble free. The impact that educational research or dissemination has on those is equivalent to making a healthy body even healthier.

Few social scientists would argue that among school organizations, the urban school organizations are the least healthy. They are the ones housing the most acute problems. And because of their debilitative conditions, they are possibly the school organizations that have been studied the most. Yet despite an array of findings from educational research, enumerating methods to help the schools, and dissemination

activities ranging from elaborate workshops to new school curriculum packages, today's urban schools are no better equipped to provide a quality education for disadvantaged youth than the ones of twenty years ago. The urban school problems of twenty years ago (low staff morale, low achievement scores, and playground violence to name a few) are the problems of today and without impending help, the problems of tomorrow. Progress toward equity in education has been minimal.

Urban school organizations desperately need help to solve their problems and dilemmas. Educational research projects can, if executed and disseminated in a nonthreatening and non-time-consuming manner, provide the needed help. However, many of today's urban school administrators are reluctant to allow researchers and research projects into their school districts or buildings. Most cite the research "rip-off" artist of the sixties as a prime reason for closing their school doors to research. Urban administrators also say that researchers make exaggerated promises of overnight changing urban districts from unstable environments into marvelous learning institutions and never deliver the promises. In addition, they claim that researchers often seem to pry too much into the personal affairs and behaviors of the participants in the school organization by asking staff to fill out lengthy questionnaires and answer grueling interview questions. Lastly, urban administrators feel that researchers do not seem to appreciate the many hours the schools staff spends prior to the researchers' arrival trying to solve their own problems, and that participating in a research project takes up additional time beyond everyday work.

Urban school administrators, in general, view the practice of educational research as a process of giving and taking, one in which the school gives (time, accessibility, information, etc.) and the researcher takes (mostly information and time). It is also viewed as a process with little benefit and payoff. An administrator of one urban district once remarked to a colleague of mine that he wasn't interested in becoming involved in another thing that was simply going to do nothing for his school. He said that nearly everyone of the researchers whom he had allowed to study his school could not, after analyzing questionnaires, tell him anything that he did not already know. And usually they left the school with one finding -- a recommendation for additional research.

In addition, problems of research validity and reliability also occur for researchers when school staffs feel taken advantage of by a study, or are reluctant to participate in a study. For example, a group of teachers of an urban school once confided to me that three of them filled out fifty questionnaires of a survey research study. According to the teachers, the study was conducted by a professor from a major college who was a friend of the assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent volunteered the school's participation in the study for his friend. The principal of the school, angered by the assistant superintendent's heavy-handed play, and not viewing the researcher's questionnaires as contributing to his school, decided for the sake of expediency that his three PE teachers would have ample time to fill out seventeen questionnaires a piece during their class periods.

The previous example is by no means a unique case and from the little unobtrusive data that I have gathered, examples of false research

data taken from urban schools seem frequent. Yet the importance of valid, systematic research within urban schools cannot be overstated. For if the schools are to be helped to overcome their difficulties, they are going to need positive findings tested in urban settings. Findings from other school settings are generally not applicable in urban ones.

User Initiated Research vs Researcher Initiated Research

All schools have many external forces that hinder their operating at optimal capacity. Figure 1 illustrates a few. The external forces in Figure 1 originate outside of the immediate school building, but they must be acted on and solved within the building.

Figure 1

Some External Forces that Hinder a School's Optimal Operational Capacity

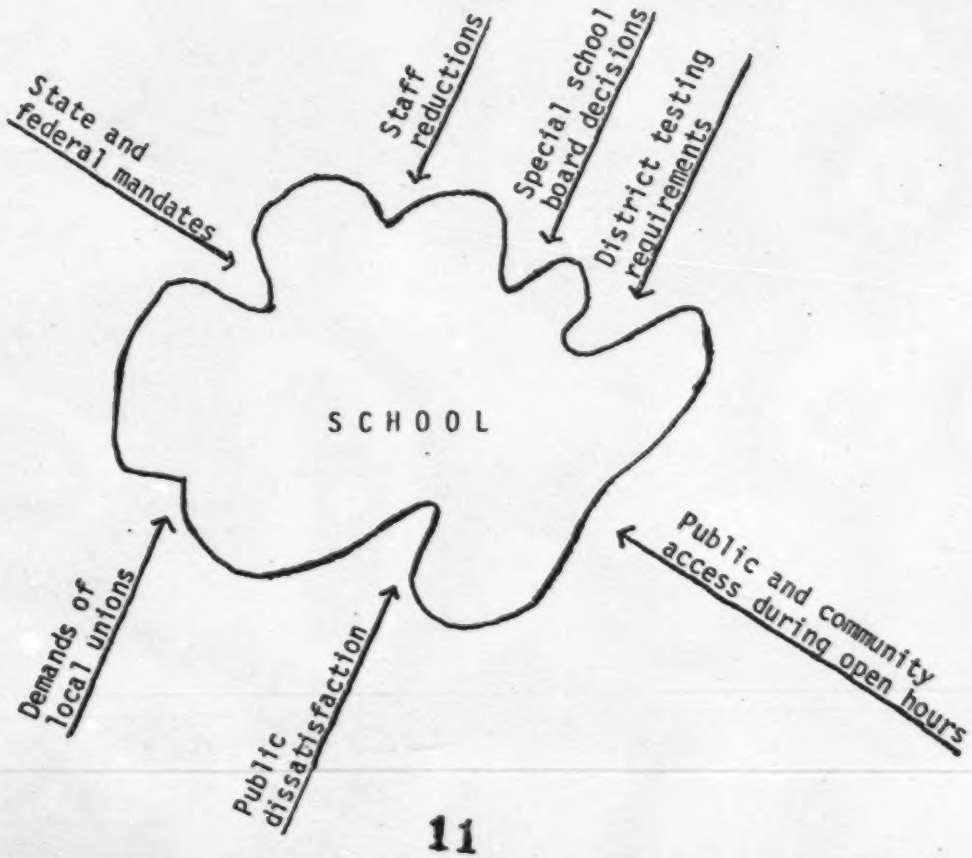
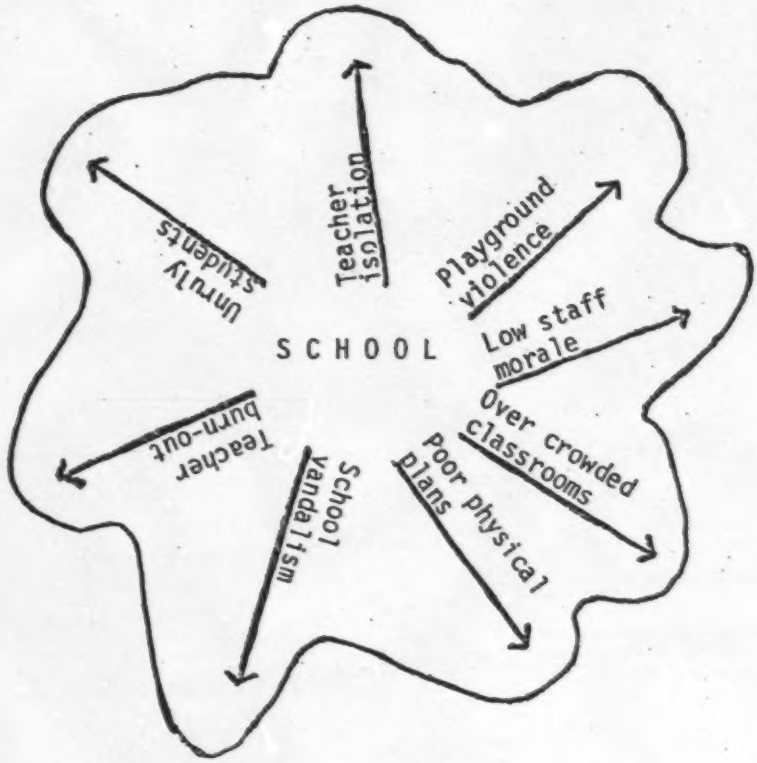


Figure 2, illustrates some of the internal forces that keep schools from optimal operational capacity. While the forces of figure 1 and 2

Figure 2

Some Internal Forces that Hinder a School's Optimal Operational Capacity



are not totally unique for urban schools, the forces generally have a longer lasting and stronger impact on urban schools than they do on other schools.

Both sets of forces may be viewed as contributing to problem areas in schools. They represent problems that have, for the most part, been lingering in public schools since their creation. In addition, they also represent problems that school administrators would like to have addressed.

Of special concern to administrators are internal forces because they are the most constant and reinforce each other. For example, overcrowded classrooms, teacher isolation, and disciplining problem students speedup teacher burn-out.

Urban school administrators would like to know how to slow or stop teacher burn-out. They also would like answers and programs to curb student violence and vandalism. In fact, urban administrators would like any true answers and tested programs that will help to relieve some of the internal and external hinderances. However, answers and programs to help administrators with the forces are not abundant, because many social scientists have become frustrated seeking answers to those same age-old problems. Hull (1978) noted that educational researchers produce significant amounts of knowledge that is of little use to school practitioners. The knowledge may serve other purposes, like stimulating additional avenues of research, but does not directly improve educational practice nor help practitioners solve or confront their daily problems.

The failure of educational researchers and school practitioners to come together on a research agenda adds to the well known gap between research and practice. As researchers disagree with practitioners about which educational issues are more important, practitioners find that most information in any form from researchers is useless.

Elements of the Change Process

Usually information, materials, or programs that are disseminated into a school district are for the purposes of changing something within the

district or its schools. Sometimes tasks, management structures, procedures, or programs of a school do not operate effectively and create more problems than they help solve. School administrators therefore, sometimes need new operational systems (usually drawn from research studies) to help solve problems. Often however, there is a certain amount of blind naiveness that accompanies the introduction of new systems. For example, I have known school principals to attend conferences in a part of the country different than their own, hear fascinating stories from their colleagues (of yet another part of the country) about how a certain program reduced a school's absentee rate or how another program increased the reading level of fifth graders by two percentage points, and with no regard for their own unique context and setting, the principals force feed a cloned version of the programs to their staff. Often these principals become shocked when the programs fail to produce the desired results. Even more discouraging to the principals is the length of time it takes to get the smallest element of the program into place.

Change is no easy feat and does take time. It takes time because there is resistance to change. Resistance, though healthy, normal, and expected, greatly slows the change process and working through resistance to change in a school is very time consuming. Both researchers and practitioners are apt to become frustrated with the lengthy and time consuming change process. Administrative practitioners who want almost immediate results often loose patience with researchers or technical assistance disseminators and sometimes decide to bring a program to a premature end.

Change in a school is not only time consuming, it is also unsettling. Individual staff members are asked to perform in different

ways. They are asked to integrate new ways of dealing with old problems into their daily routine. Some at first feel pressure to do well and then feel guilt for being unable to quickly grasp new routines. Others, having gone through a myriad of previous innovations that led to little benefits merely go through the motions of participating in a new effort and undermine it as often as possible. And of course, there are other staff members who will be gung ho for new changes which often alienates apathetic colleagues.

Usually participation in one change process is about all any one principal can stomach. Experience has taught them "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Stating it another way, most principals who have tried something new, especially those in the urban areas (often the target for new research) feel that it is better to blunder along in a small mess rather than introduce some strategy that might make a bigger mess.

The Values and Goals of Educational Researchers

Those who engage in educational research for the most part are university and college professors. They adhere to the values and goals of the organizations that they represent and not necessarily those of the public school systems. While their motives for doing research on public schools may on the surface be viewed as primarily ultraistic or humanitarian, many researchers hold those motives to be of secondary importance. The major goal of these researchers is virtually to impress their university

colleagues, to make tenure, and to further their careers. Many of them, who cite problems of research contamination, choose not to enter public school settings. They are therefore, insensitive to consequences their research may have upon the rhythms of life in a school. They fail to realize that once a questionnaire is administered, it raises the level of expectation among a school's participants that something more is going to happen that will in some way help the school. However, too often that something more happens in the form of an esoteric, jargon packed report to the staff. As the principal of one school once quipped to me as he pulled a 150 page research report from his shelf: "I hope if you do something like this, you'll at least stick around and tell us what it means."

Unfortunately, many researchers do not stick around after completing a project. It seems that there is never enough time or money to adequately translate the findings of a particular research program for the participants in schools. Money appears to be the main stoppage. It generally runs out just before dissemination is to occur. And so researchers are forced to retreat from a project, write additional proposals to disseminate their findings or to obtain aid for another project at a different site, and send a report to the original research site.

Another value of researchers that sometimes keeps work from being disseminated and keeps administrative practitioners at a distance is the way success is measured. Researchers will sometimes make bold statements about small significance levels or pronounce a program of success, not because it has helped to solve a school's problems, but because a significant number of schools try out the program.

To say that all educational researchers espouse the values and goals described above would be inaccurate. The precise number is unknown, actually not needed and is not at issue. At issue is that even when a small number of researchers engage in practices that many of us label as charlatan, those researchers leave an almost non-removable scare on both the research profession and on the researched school. As the stories of scares increase, fewer and fewer practitioners will be anxious to participate in educational research and dissemination activities.

Complex Methods of Dissemination

Eidell and Kitchell (1968) describe the process of educational research, development and utilization or dissemination activities as having four interdependent steps: (1) Knowledge is produced, (2) research findings are developed into a usable form, (3) the knowledge is used by practitioners to solve local problems, and (4) activities informed by a sound knowledge base produce positive results and schools improve.

Another criticism of educational researchers is that many only engage in step one of the research process. Steps two through four are ignored, forgotten, sometimes seen as having little value, or as previously mentioned lose out to money deficiencies and so are often postponed for a later date. Ironically steps two through four are the very steps necessary for closing the gap between research and practice. Indeed, they compromise the most widely used model for dissemination.

However, the steps have not been totally excluded from the R & D process. Under the sponsorship of federal dollars, efforts have been and are being made to translate the findings of educational research into usable forms for school practitioners. But current efforts, though created by well intentioned individuals, have not improved the relationship between research and practice, nor have they improved schools.

Deal and Rallis (1980) point out that it is difficult for dissemination efforts to be anywhere near effective because they are on the one hand an elaborate system of boundary spanning organizations, housing people with confusing roles and titles and on the other hand complex informational retrieval systems, individual linking agents and research development and dissemination projects.

The "middle man" role -- Deal and Rallis' title for those who operationalize the current dissemination model -- has floundered due to confusion and disaffection. Confusion is found in many forms. It might be in the form of specially created dissemination programs or projects struggling to define their client group. It could be linking agents caught between researchers and practitioners demands. Or it might entail any number of other problems faced by vaguely defined and ill-conceived nascent organizations.

Confusion leads to disaffection. It is difficult for individuals caught in the middle of a process, which they had little responsibility in developing, to have any faith or feelings of ownership for the process. It is especially difficult for these middle people because they are essentially in a role that requires reading the minds of researchers, drawing knowledge from the mind reading phase and then transforming that knowledge into usable form for practitioners. Yet that process

is more disaffective and complicated than it looks on paper, because sometimes each phase of the linking system represents a distinct component. For example, the mind reading phase might be carried out by one group (the dissemination program of NWREL fits into this category); the drawing of knowledge from the mind reading might occur in a special workshop with a special cohort of linkers (the dissemination program of NWREL's National Seminars is an example); and the transforming into usable form for practitioners might happen in a state department of education (sometimes curriculum specialists or developers have that responsibility).

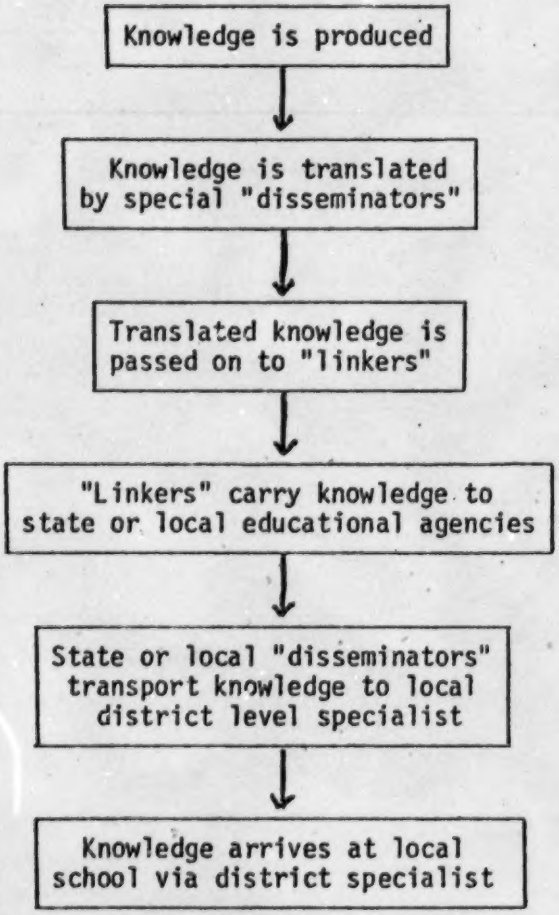
When the information from research finally gets to a form for the practitioner, it may be an inaccurate or distorted version. It may also be that the deliverer of the translated research is unable to answer even the simplest questions about its development or the nature of hypotheses that lead to its creation. In addition, the complicated dissemination structure increases the difficulty of affective followup and evaluation. It may also be the case that when the research arrives through the long involved process, it is dated and unable to solve current problems. Figure 3 gives an example of the downward flow of the current and, seemingly, most used dissemination model. Surely a simpler method of dissemination seems appropriate and much needed.

Recommendations for a Simplistic Model

Education is one of the few, if not the only, professional field that handles most of its linkage between research and practice (i.e.,

Figure 3

Current Model for Dissemination


Knowledge is produced
Knowledge is translated by special "disseminators"
Translated knowledge is passed on to "linkers"
"Linkers" carry knowledge to state or local educational agencies
State or local "disseminators" transport knowledge to local district level specialist
Knowledge arrives at local school via district specialist

dissemination) via a complicated system of external linking agents. Other professional organizations, for the most part, have developed functional and simplistic internal systems. Education has the capacity and resources to do the same and can do it with few modifications or drastic changes. Recommendations are:

1. Collaboration between researcher and practitioner as step one in the R & D process. For research to impact at the local site level, the presumed desired outcome, local practitioners (especially those in urban settings) need to be included in determining or having input into research agendas. As it currently stands, individuals of state and federal departments of education contribute to research agendas or researchers generate free-lance hypotheses. Both methods provide useful information but so far have had very little impact on helping local school staffs to overcome some of their more pressing problems. Input from local staff seems important if the goal of educational research is to be accomplished.

2. Researchers participating in dissemination activities as a part of the educational research process. If the educational research process is to impact on local educational institutions, researchers need to participate in all steps of the educational R & D process. Researchers have insights into the value and uses of their studies in a variety of settings. That value and those uses are best translated into usable form for practitioners by the researchers who created the original studies and not by technical assistant specialists in state or local educational agencies. Technical assistance specialists do not have the same insights into the studies nor do they fully understand the conditions under which the research was carried out. Researchers need to work both with technical assistant specialists and local practitioners for transforming their work into usable form and to assist both in the implementation of the transformed information. Usable forms of research, of course, mean more than journal articles, a report of the research, or a paper delivered at a conference.

3. Elimination of the "middle person" as the key person for dissemination. As noted earlier, linking agents and other in-between agents of dissemination have a difficult time defining their role as well as the nature of their activities. That confusion and others brought about by the role, stiffle the process of dissemination. In addition, linkers are often caught between researcher needs (what researchers perceive as important research) and practitioner needs (what practitioners feel is needed for school improvement).

4. Federal, state, and local support for dissemination. Currently, schools that need help, for the most part, resist the help in any form. They resist the help, because usually there are strings attached to the help. The strings are usually the expectations of helpers from the school. Helpers expect the school staff to gleefully and willingly participate in an untested or untried innovation. They expect the school staff to provide time for extra meetings, filling out forms, and receiving special training or instruction. And they expect the school staff to understand the importance of the helper's program. The expectations of helpers to a certain degree seem reasonable. However, when those expectations of school staff are placed along side of federal, state, and local expectations, such as forms to fill in for this or that mandated program or a monthly testing program, to mention two, they tend to give practitioners the feeling of being overwhelmed. Usually, the federal, state, and local mandates will be given priority over all other school-wide projects. Since a school work day, as most organizational work days, has a set number of hours and most of the hours are reserved for teaching rather than

planning, implementing new dissemination activities or innovative projects in a school mired in federal programs is next to impossible. Urban schools, identified earlier as the ones especially needing help, are the schools steeped the deepest in federal, state, and local mandated programs. Until those schools are divorced from the mounds of paper work that accompany such programs, and given support (which might mean a temporary suspension of some programs) to participate in research or dissemination activities, educational research will have little impact and produce minimal changes in urban schools.

5. Formative evaluation included as a step in the R & D process. Ongoing evaluation of newly implemented programs is a necessary, but currently missing step in the R & D process. Formative evaluation provides information from the recipients of the implemented program about its worth, about any changes or needed modifications in the program, about conditions (climate) of the school during implementation, about whether the program has any effects on the school -- a better or worse place -- and so forth. Through formative evaluation, new hypotheses about the potential success of an innovation or the worth of developmental materials may be generated and tested. Formative evaluation reports also provide information for making modifications on innovations transported to a setting different from the one than the innovation was originally tested.

Summary

The process of educational dissemination is currently a jumble of independent and loosely implemented innovations, materials, special

classes, and so forth. And for the most part dissemination is carried out by linking agents who have difficulty in defining their role as well as what is meant by dissemination. As a result, dissemination has had very little impact on schools. Other more serious problems with dissemination seem to stem more from educational researchers' lack of collaboration with school practitioners than they do from a lack of definitions. Until educational researchers collaborate in part with school practitioners for setting research agendas and fully participate in all steps of the educational R & D process, dissemination will no doubt remain an undefinable subject of much discussion that has little impact on schools. In addition, for dissemination activities to influence schools toward positive changes; federal, state, and local support for activities is needed.

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